

THE CHARACTER OF SHAKESPEARE.

To come to any conclusion respecting the true character of Shakespeare is a somewhat difficult task. Little is known of his life; the few documents that remain are of doubtful origin, and the allusions made to him by his contemporaries are of such a vague and uncertain nature that one is inclined to despair of forming any opinion of the self of the man whose influence upon the world has been so deep and strong.

Yet this man, whose work was so definite, whose words have become the help and stay of the generations that succeeded him, whose thoughts have become such a part of the English people that they use them without even knowing that it was Shakespeare who first uttered them. This man must surely have had a strong individuality, which would teach us much if, from the dim mist of tradition and the contradiction of facts, we could glean some idea of what he really was.

William Shakespeare was born April 23rd, 1564. His father, John Shakespeare, was a glover in Stratford-on-Avon, who married in 1557 Mary Arden, the daughter of his landlord.

Shakespeare's parents were both of highly-respectable families, and, during the early years of the poet's life, John Shakespeare appeared a most successful man, who became first alderman and eventually high bailiff.

Reverses of fortune, however, obliged him to withdraw his son William from school, and an opinion prevails that the poet filled in the time between his schooldays and the date of his leaving Stratford by working in an attorney's office. It is probable that he gave generous support to his father, who died in comfort about 1601.

In 1582 William Shakespeare was married to Anne Hathaway. Little is known of his married life beyond the fact that his wife was several years his senior, and it is supposed that she and her husband had little in common, although the latter years of Shakespeare's life seemed to pass peacefully in his own home. From his writings little can be gleaned

about his home life; but there is a passage in "Twelfth Night" which would seem to shew that Shakespeare's experience had taught him the danger of marrying one much older than himself.

Then let thy love be younger than thyself,
Or thy affection cannot hold the bent :
For women are as roses ; whose fair flower,
Being once displayed, doth fall that very hour.

About five years after his marriage Shakespeare left Stratford and went to London, where, after patient perseverance, he began to make a name both as an actor and as a play writer, and to gather wealth which should eventually leave him liberty and leisure to devote himself to his art.

He seems to have made many warm friends, amongst them Ben Jonson, who held the poet in high esteem, and the young earl of Southampton, to whom "Venus and Adonis" is dedicated, and again "Lucrece," in terms of such warm affection.

In 1596 Hamnet, Shakespeare's only son, died, thus destroying his father's hopes of building up the family name. During Shakespeare's residence in London, it is recorded that he paid yearly visits to his home, and one would incline to think that the years of toil, spent far from his family, were passed in order to secure a quiet home life later on, for in 1597 we hear of him buying New Place, a fine house and estate at Stratford, where his latter days were passed in the peaceful enjoyment of his quiet home.

How then, from these few facts, are we to form any estimate of the true character of England's greatest poet? One could make of him almost what one would, for all the stories recorded of him are of such uncertain origin and contradict each other so flagrantly. To judge of him by his writings is again difficult, for "his works are so many windows through which we see a glimpse of the world within him." The self of the poet seems to be merged into the self of the person he is portraying, and he seems "to be able to sympathize so completely with all creatures as to deprive himself, together with his personal identity, even of his conscience, as he casts himself into their hearts." We can picture to ourselves that he was genial and good natured, "civil in demeanour and excellent in the qualities he professes." How else can we

account for the many tales which, though they may be incorrect in detail, all agree in pointing to his jovial, rollicking life?

He was evidently a shrewd man of business. He dealt in malt, and he was a money-lender. Records shew that he was a man of sharp practice, who exacted his just due, and shrewdly used opportunities to his own advantage. He set himself to retrieve the fortunes of his family, and worked incessantly to that end, investing his money almost completely in Stratford.

He must have been a man of absolute penetration and keen foresight, making occasion serve him till a fit moment should arrive for leading the higher intellectual life he had aspired to. Till then he husbanded his strength, thus shewing that he was prudent and self-controlled.

It is as though he lived two lives—by his well-balanced mind holding each in its proper place and letting the one serve the other. Such self-control could only result from the habit of a lifetime, and the growth of his will and determination may be traced in his writings, where, without seeking the poet's self in any special character, one unconsciously becomes impressed with the personality of the writer, growing in strength and will, penetrating into the depths, and soaring to the very heights as time goes on.

That Shakespeare's mind had an extraordinary power of receptivity is evident from the accurate knowledge he possessed in matters entirely opposed to each other. He must have been quick to realize fact and apt in storing all valuable information in his mind. That he was sympathetic is without doubt, or how could he have sounded the inmost heart of human nature, discerning all, and knowing how to set it forth in such a way that it would be the human nature not only of his own day but of all time?

Whether Shakespeare was religious or not, in the ordinary acceptance of the word, we cannot say: rather we would incline to think that he was not; yet he bowed his head to the moral laws of the world and unerringly acknowledged their supremacy. The influence of Protestantism was strong upon the world in his day, and cannot fail to have insensibly influenced Shakespeare. "Men found that the earth is in heaven, that God is not above nature, touching it through rare preternatural points of contact; rather that He is not

far from every one of us; that human life is sacred, and time a fragment of eternity."

It is as though Shakespeare had a clear perception of moral facts and a definite sense of the value of life, seeming to trouble himself but little about theology, and rather to content himself with accepting the mystery. Thus as we fall into narrowness, he delivers us by some great question put, some great problem which he, least of all, tries to solve, but which renews in us that search after infinite truth which alone can save us from sinking into that mean spirit of content which can accept all and question nothing.

One of the features of the Elizabethan literature is its vigorous vitality. It holds all upon earth real, and it concerns itself little with the things beyond. It goes with man to the threshold of the future state, but pauses there. So the keen sense of truth in Shakespeare makes him also pause and hesitate to raise the veil of the mysteries beyond. He leaves his readers where he feels himself—in a state of uncertainty. To him it was enough to seek out the divine in man, to teach in every possible way the justice which shapes the lives of each; to point out the penalty of wrong and the wisdom of well doing. He sought to impress the value of life and the need for using every opportunity. He was content to teach his lesson and to wait.

Indeed, one could think that a calm contentment was, ultimately, one of the beautiful features of Shakespeare's character; he was as one who had fought the great battle and conquered. The waters had been deep, but he was not overpowered. He could look down upon life as one who had learned the secret; with grave and gentle pity he could share the joys and sorrows of the world with the serenity born of fortitude and with the faith "that there is something without and around our human lives of which we know little, yet which we know to be beneficent and divine."

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